

Executive Summary

Reading First is a federal initiative authorized by Title I, Part B, Subpart 1 of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. The initiative provides an unprecedented amount of funding and focused support to states for the improvement of K-3 reading instruction, with the ultimate goal of ensuring that all children read at grade level by the end of third grade.

The Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI) was awarded a six-year federal Reading First state grant in July 2003 and, after an initial planning and sub-grant application stage, awarded sub-grants to 17 schools in January 2004. An additional three schools were added in June 2004, bringing the total number of cohort 1 schools to 20. These schools are diverse in terms of size and geographic location, but nearly all of them serve a high proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a measure of family poverty. Also, the majority of students at eight of the 20 schools are Native American.

During Year 2, the evaluation collected data through surveys of principals, reading coaches and teachers; interviews with principals, reading coaches and district representatives; focus groups with staff members serving on the Reading Leadership Team; observations of reading classrooms and interventions for struggling readers; and evaluator attendance at selected professional development events.

Overall, Montana Reading First saw many successes in 2004–2005. Significant gains in student achievement were made in all four grades so that by spring 2005, 61.5 percent of K-3 students met benchmark. The state provided well-received professional development and intensive technical assistance to schools; principals and coaches viewed the state staff as supportive and helpful. There was evidence of strong assessment and communication systems, instruction using core reading programs chosen from scientifically based reading research, and interventions provided for struggling students. While these successes are impressive, there is still room to strengthen the program and address some of challenges identified in this report, such as refining interventions, utilizing Knowledge Box to its full potential, and further strengthening communication in some schools. While achievement results are promising, over one-third of students are still struggling to read at grade-level and achievement gaps remain wide among some subgroups.

Key findings and recommendations for Year 2 are summarized below and described more thoroughly in the full report.

Professional Development

The Montana Reading First project greatly increased the amount and intensity of professional development offerings in reading provided to teachers, reading coaches, and principals. Overall, professional development was appreciated and highly rated by those participating with few caveats.

Teachers received professional development from an array of sources. They rated the coaching they received at their school, such as observations, demonstration lessons, and feedback from their coach, as the most useful of all the various forms of professional development. In addition, most teachers gave the 2004 Summer Institute high ratings and about two-thirds of them found training from core program publishers helpful. However, there were mixed reactions to professional development delivered through the digital learning software system, Knowledge Box, and only about half of teachers found study groups helpful.

Reading coaches and principals agreed that the bimonthly training they received from the state was relevant and of high-quality. While coaches were pleased with the amount of coaching, most principals felt there had been more training on leadership than they required. Training by the Consortium on Reading Excellence was often cited as a highlight of the year.

Technical Assistance

Overall, coaches and principals were very satisfied with the assistance from the state project staff members who communicated regularly with schools and visited most schools at least once a month. State project staff members were unusually clear in their communication of grant expectations to participating schools and provided ongoing support for schools to meet those expectations.

Leadership

The principal and reading coach are essential to the implementation of Reading First in Montana. Although the expectations placed on them were high, most principals rose to meet the expectations. Perhaps most impressive was the frequency with which principals visited classrooms despite their sometimes overwhelming schedules; they also provided feedback that teachers considered helpful. Compared to the start of the grant, principals were viewed by many more staff members as visible advocates of reading and knowledgeable about reading research and practice.

Reading coaches worked extremely hard to fulfill the responsibilities of their job and were well-regarded by staff in their schools. Coaches spent a lot of time coaching teachers, although managing assessments took up a great deal of their time as well. Often, coaches had to fill additional responsibilities as well.

Reading Leadership Teams (RLT) also played leadership roles in many schools. All schools had functioning RLTs, and most were well-regarded in their schools. While many RLTs made decisions about grant implementation, the coach and principal still shouldered the majority of grant responsibilities.

Districts were involved in the grant in different ways, often depending on the size of the district. All principals rated their district “supportive” although the intensity of district

support varied. Many districts also spread Reading First practices to other schools and grades in their district.

Buy-in and Collaboration

Support for the instructional changes under Reading First, which was fairly high at the start of the grant, remained high among coaches, principals, and teachers. Resistance to the grant still existed, but usually came from one or a handful of teachers among an otherwise-supportive staff. While coaches and principals received some professional development about dealing with resistance, some requested further training in this area.

Systems for communication and collaboration, including grade-level meetings, RLT meetings, and study groups, were well-established by spring 2005 in most schools. Most teachers attended grade-level meetings at least twice a month and found these meetings the most useful. While communication was strong in many schools, some schools struggled to make conversations interactive and open to multiple viewpoints.

Assessment Systems

Over the course of the year, schools developed and refined student assessment systems and their regular use of data skyrocketed. Many decisions were data-based, especially decisions regarding interventions, grouping, and instruction. The state provided training and technical assistance that emphasized administration and scoring consistency to increase the validity and reliability of assessment results.

Instruction and Interventions

The amount of time and resources dedicated to reading instruction increased dramatically from the start of the grant. By spring 2005, all schools had a 90-minute block of reading in grades one through three; 70 percent of schools dedicated 90 minutes in kindergarten. Schools used core reading programs during the block, stressing “fidelity” to the scope and sequence of that core program. However, there was some disagreement or confusion among teachers and coaches about the extent to which modifications to the core program were appropriate.

During 21 classroom observations in seven visited schools, evaluators observed instruction in all five essential components of reading and rated student engagement, lesson clarity, practice opportunities, and effective questions as satisfactory in at least 70 percent of classrooms. Fewer lessons, although still the majority, demonstrated monitoring, modeling, or direct and frequent feedback to students.

Establishing formal intervention programs was a major accomplishment at many schools. Over half of Montana Reading First students (1,668 students or approximately 54%) received some intervention outside the 90-minute reading block. Schools relied heavily on assessment data to make decisions about intervention placements, although some

schools admittedly had to make decisions about who to serve with limited resources. Some schools still found challenges with materials, scheduling, and staffing.

Overall, the majority of survey respondents believed that reading instruction had improved noticeably during the year and that schools were providing interventions to students who needed them.

Student Assessment Outcomes

Overall, Montana Reading First saw significant gains in student achievement during Year 2. Compared to the previous spring, more students in all four grades were at benchmark (reading at or above grade level) on the DIBELS. Specifically:

- 69.6 percent of kindergarten students
- 63.4 percent of first-grade students
- 56.2 percent of second-grade students and
- 57.1 percent of third-grade students were at benchmark.

The gains from spring to spring were statistically significant at every grade level. Also statistically significant were gains made during the year (from fall 2004 to spring 2005). All grades also witnessed decreases in the percentage of students needing intensive intervention.

Disaggregated data show a somewhat mixed picture. Although all students made progress, students who were Native American, eligible for special education, and/or eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, were less likely to reach benchmark, and in some cases their progress was also slower than that of their peers.

In addition, the progress from year to year appears to have slowed dramatically in schools with former REA grants. At the end of 2005, former REA schools had fewer students at benchmark in every grade than non-REA schools, and their progress from spring-to-spring was minimal.

Recommendations

Overall, evaluators found many positives to report about Year 2 of Montana Reading First and recognize that state project staff members have already begun to address many of the challenges raised in this report as part of Year 3 activities. The following summarized recommendations are drawn from the findings described in this report. They are particularly focused on issues related to sustainability of grant activities.

Professional Development and Technical Assistance:

- Identify a group of schools that is ready for “advanced” training or implementation and provide differentiated technical assistance and training in areas such as peer classroom observations or self-directed study groups.

- Increase the utility and content of Knowledge Box in ways such as adding videos of classrooms taught by Montana Reading First coaches, state reading specialists, and/or classroom teachers and using it to share more examples and resources for interventions. Schools with previous success using Knowledge Box could be asked to share their experiences.
- Call upon the knowledge and experience of cohort 1 schools for training and technical assistance to cohort 2.

School-level Structures:

- Encourage further distribution of grant responsibilities to ensure that the project can be sustained. This might include training a selection of teacher leaders to take on responsibilities such as facilitating grade level meetings, encouraging the RLT and grade-level teams to take on more responsibilities, and ensuring that all teachers are trained to progress-monitor students.
- At the same time, schools should be urged to “protect” coaches’ time as much as possible, minimizing non-coaching duties.

Instruction and Interventions:

- Continue to track and address issues raised in disaggregated data results, especially the slowing progress of REA schools and the gap in absolute scores as well as progress between some groups (e.g., between Native American and white students)
- Further refine intervention systems to ensure that group size meets the recommended ratios and that materials are meeting the needs identified in each school.
- Continue to train coaches to work with teachers on the areas of reading instruction they most need, while still focusing on project-wide priorities. Observation data suggest areas for additional attention might include monitoring students and adjusting the lesson based on that monitoring, modeling, and the type and frequency of feedback to students. Student engagement is another issue to continually readdress in schools.
- Continue to provide guidance to schools about issues related to instruction of Native American students; help schools locate external resources if the state is not able to provide specific expertise.

All of the above findings and recommendations are discussed more thoroughly in the full report. Evaluators recommend that, as in the past, the state share these findings with schools and uses the report in professional development discussions at both the state and school level.